

Under Pressure: The 2025 General Election in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article discusses the context and the results of the 2025 general election in the Czech Republic. It stresses the importance of the change of the contextual conditions including the new geopolitical situation after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and linked it to the domestic political outcomes. It concludes that the economic impact of the invasion (rise of inflation and pressures in the energy supply) fuelled growing discontent in the Czech society that helped the electoral success of populist political parties and subsequent formation of the populist government. Furthermore, the text analyses the electoral results, pointing to the uneven rise in electoral turnout and the change in the distribution of support among the political parties. Electoral turnout increase was primarily concentrated in socioeconomically vulnerable municipalities characterized by higher shares of primary-educated voters and elevated unemployment rates. The electoral results confirmed a progressive deepening of spatial polarization and reveal a clear pattern of territorial sorting among established political blocs (populist vs anti-populist). This divide was manifested along three dimensions: the classic urban-rural cleavage, the centrum-periphery axis, and a widening structural divergence between lagging, post-industrial regions and economically resilient and richer territories. The pattern aligns with broader European dynamics regarding the 'geography of discontent' where regional economic stagnation and peripheralization foster distinct party alignments.

Keywords: elections; party system; Czechia; populism; Babiš; radical right

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1. Context preceding the election

The Czech 2025 general elections were important for a number of reasons. They were held at a time of significant geopolitical instability, as the first general elections in the country since the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The global political, security and economic pressures also combined with unique domestic pressures. Together these factors had a significant impact on the form and content of pre-election campaigns, as well as on the electoral outcomes. The elections were in the spotlight abroad due to the risk of populists returning to power (Havlík, 2025), as well as in the context of democratic backsliding and illiberal tendencies that were noticed to take place elsewhere across the region of Central-eastern Europe (CEE).

The party landscape prior to the 2025 elections was defined by two opposition populist parties, YES/Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) and Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), and the coalition governmental parties that ran under two electoral coalitions of Together (SPOLU) and PirSTAN (Czech Pirate Party and Mayors and Independents). SPOLU grouped the right-wing conservative parties like Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Tradition Responsibility Prosperity (TOP 09) and the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL), while the centre-right coalition of PirSTAN, consisting of the Czech Pirate Party and Mayors of Independents, aimed at the younger, more liberal, urban-based electorates. Since the 2021 general elections, the Czech party system had one relatively unique aspect, as it completely lacked a parliamentary representation of left-wing parties. Both established parties of the traditional left, Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) that later rebranded to Social Democracy (SOCDEM), and Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) lost their representation when their vote shares fell under the electoral threshold. Their attempt to return to the parliament was not successful, despite uniting together under the Stačilo! (Enough) brand just ahead of the 2025 elections, prolonging the crisis of the left in Czech context even further.

2. Circumstances fuelling the discontent in Czech society

Different factors contributed to the growing support of populists ahead of the 2025 elections. Among these, the most significant contributing factors were the economic pressures and grievances felt by large segments of Czech society (Cirhan & Gherghina, 2026). Most of these issues started to unravel already at the beginning of the former government's term, and later gradually transformed into growing frustration of the electorate. Concretely, the economic uncertainty caused by rampant public spending during the then still recent Covid-19 pandemic

that accelerated domestic inflation, was further fuelled by another major crisis that started on the 24th of February 2022.

The invasion of Ukraine pushed the already rising inflation in the highly Russian-gas dependent Czech economy to new highs. In the longer term, the high prices of basic commodities, such as utilities and groceries, in combination with stagnating wages created a perfect storm. Czechs experienced some of the highest inflation growths in the EU, prices increasing over fifteen percent in 2022 and over ten percent in 2023 (Czech National Bank [CNB], 2023). The former government started to rapidly lose popularity, a trend from which the populists in opposition benefited in every electoral poll. As a result, the Czech party system has experienced a rising popularity of these populist parties scoring almost 60% in pre-election polls. Eventually, the ruling coalition's rating in public polls hit the lowest since 2013, when the ODS-led government collapsed in a major corruption scandal (Fraňková, 2023). Likewise, the former prime minister Fiala was among the worst in the ranking of political leaders in 2024 – the year preceding the recent parliamentary election (Buchholz, 2024).

In such a favourable economic and political climate for the opposition populist parties, ANO and SPD, focused heavily on domestic economic topics, which became a centre of their campaigns. As a result, tackling high energy prices, improving housing affordability and boosting wages were the main focus of their pre-election rhetoric. The former government's moral appeals for 'standing on the right side' (Stuchlíková & Turek, 2025) and focus on foreign policies of supporting Ukraine were no match to ANO's and SPD's promises of improving the living standards and the economy. The fragile state of the stagnating Czech economy haunted by a rapidly-growing inflation of most basic commodities created a fertile ground for such rhetoric. To make the matters even more favourable for the populists in opposition, the economic pressures combined with another major challenge, embodied by the presence of a large newly-arrived diaspora of Ukrainian refugees.

3. Growing anti-Ukrainian sentiments

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did not only affect the country economically, but also influenced the public and political discourse, representing a clear divide between the former governing and opposition parties. One of the main reasons behind this trend was a significant influx of Ukrainian refugees to Czechia. While the government parties under SPOLU and PirSTAN rhetorically sided with Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees located in the country, the opposition gradually adopted a contrasting stance, largely stemming from the shift in the societal mood.

The strong pro-Ukrainian stance of the former government that initially mobilized support at the beginning of the Russian invasion was exhausted. The

views of the public started to gradually change as the war continued, and the frustration and fatigue of the population with the economic uncertainty started to show. The growing discontent with the economic situation gradually led to rise of anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Czech society, a trend that especially the SPD populist radical right party capitalized on. Unlike in 2015, when the anti-immigrant stance of the domestic radical right was built around a largely abstract fear of migration wave into the country that never materialized, this time the presence of Ukrainian refugees was an existent issue with real consequences. Since 2022, Czechia hosted the largest number of Ukrainian refugees per-capita in Europe (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2026) and the populist parties, in particular SPD, constantly pushed the Czechs-first narrative. The staple of this strategy was the largely false argument that Ukrainian refugees residing in the country receive financial support at the expense of native Czech citizens who did not have such advantages. Due to the growing demand that several hundred thousand refugees placed on the already struggling health care, education, and social welfare systems, combined with pressure on stagnating wages and an inflated housing market, this narrative was not a hard sell.

Like SPD, ANO also occasionally relied on a similar anti-Ukrainian discourse, however not as frequently and more moderately. Amongst other aspects, the dependency of Babiš's businesses on this newly available workforce prevented ANO from voicing the more radical proposals, that were often articulated by more radical populists, like deportation of Ukrainian refugees from the country. ANO glanced at the far-right segment of voters by including anti-immigrant narratives (Naxera, 2025), joining the Patriots for Europe European Parliament group or by strengthening its cooperation with like-minded populists in other European countries. The Czech main populist radical right, SPD, that was struggling in several polls ahead of the 2025 elections reacted by forming a wide electoral coalition with three other far-right parties, securing its parliamentary presence. Another populist party that successfully competed in the elections was the Motorists for Themselves (AUTO), a party representing a fairly specific segment of voters around the single issue of anti-environmentalism and protection of combustion engine vehicles.

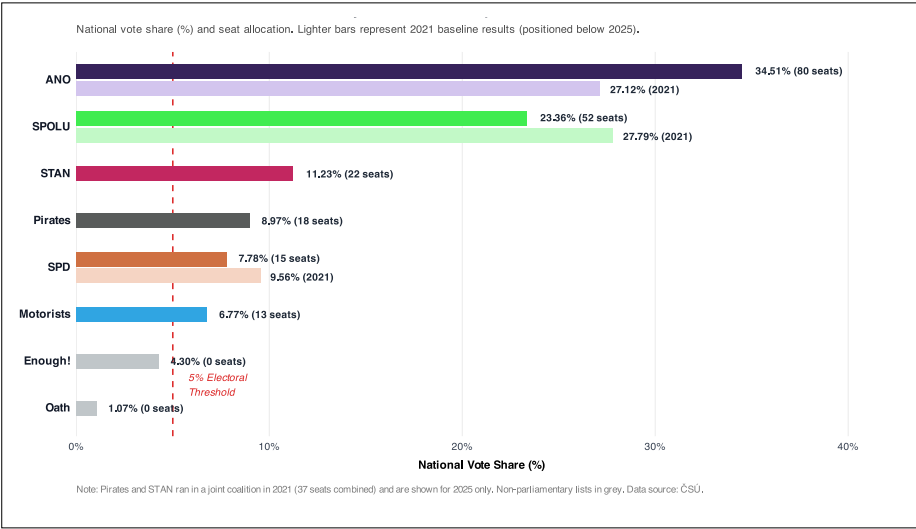
4. Results of the elections

ANO secured a decisive victory in the 2025 election, increasing its vote share by approximately seven percentage points compared to the 2021 contest, whereas the ruling SPOLU coalition experienced a decline of roughly four and a half percentage points (see Figure 1). Running on separate ballots, the Pirates and STAN collectively captured a higher vote share (20.2 %) than they achieved as a joint list in the previous election (15.6 %). Conversely, the radical right SPD

suffered a slight contraction of approximately two percentage points, while the Stačilo! faced electoral defeat again.

These shifts point to a minor voter realignment, characterized by a movement of support from small protest parties and movements toward ANO. Strategically, Andrej Babiš’s decision to stand as the lead candidate in the Moravskoslezský Region likely contributed to Stačilo!’s failure, given that the Communist party leader, Kateřina Konečná, contested her home constituency in the very same region. Through this highly personalized campaign, Babiš effectively targeted all Moravian regions, where ANO recorded substantial gains in electoral support. Nevertheless, despite the parliamentary breakthrough of AUTO, a new protest party, the overall election outcome underscores remarkable structural continuity within the party system and the underlying dynamics of party competition (see Buben & Kouba, 2026).

Figure 1:
Results of the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections in comparison to 2021



Source: The authors.

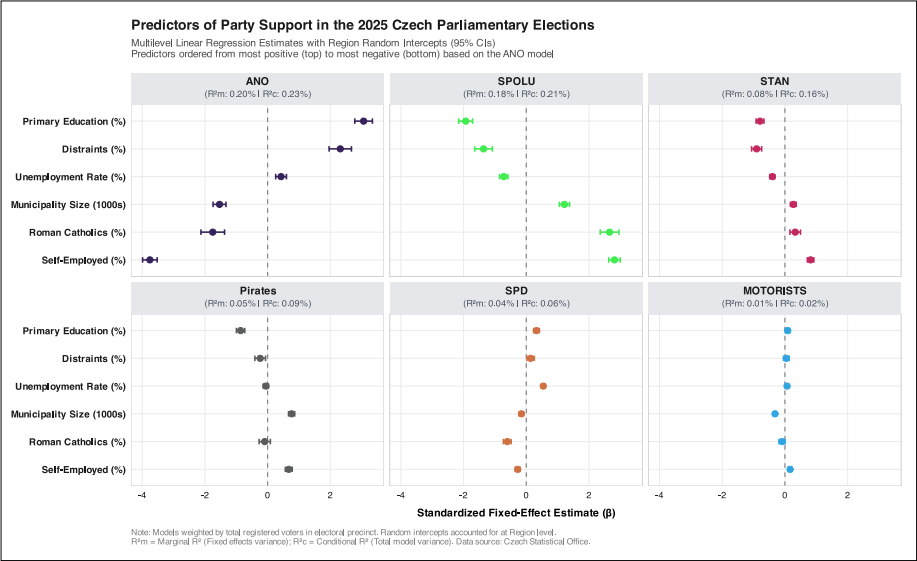
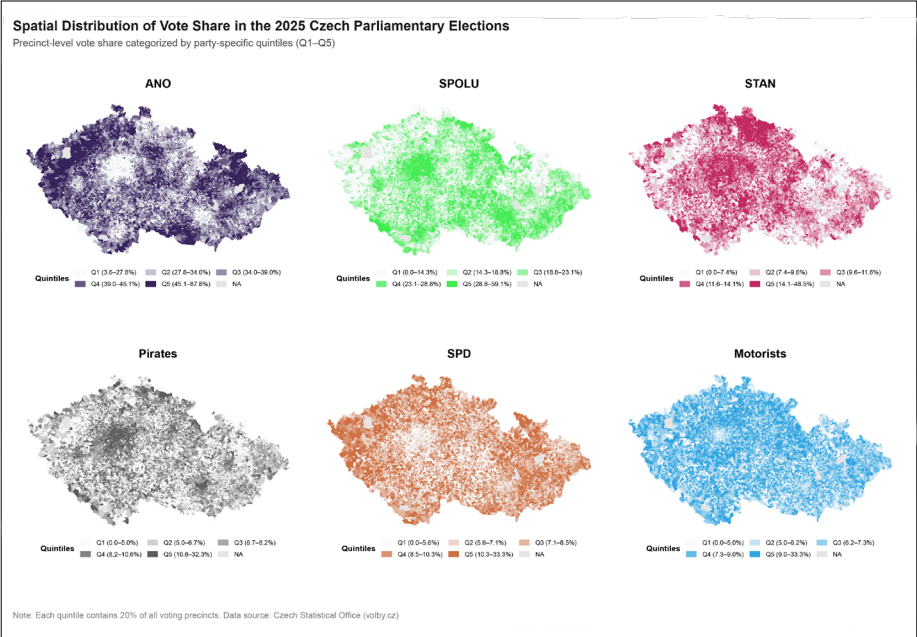
Nearly all major political actors display electoral support strongly structured by elemental sociodemographic factors. The spatial distribution of party vote shares is presented in Figure 2 alongside regression estimates of party support, utilizing key standardized sociodemographic predictors at the precinct level (the lowest spatial aggregation available) while controlling for regional heterogeneity. ANO generates its strongest support in precincts characterized by lower educational attainment (a higher proportion of voters with primary education only), elevated rates of debt distrains, and higher unemployment.

Conversely, ANO's vote share contracted in municipalities with higher shares of self-employed entrepreneurs, a higher proportion of Roman Catholics, and larger urban populations (log municipal size). The main challenger, the governing coalition SPOLU, exhibits a completely inverted pattern of electoral support. SPOLU dominates in larger urban centres, regions with higher proportions of university-educated voters, and in South Moravia, known as a traditional stronghold of KDU-ČSL that are entrenched in municipalities of higher religiosity. All these trends revealed in aggregated level analysis are supported by individual level surveys and opinion polls. In addition, opinion polls (see unique post-election survey *Ozvěny voleb 2025, 2026*) show that ANO has traditionally strong support among elderly, while the younger electorate supports SPOLU (share of 65+ was omitted from the models because it essentially measures inner peripheries and peripheral regions with older population).

Mayors and Independents (STAN) maintained its traditional strength in the Liberec and Central Bohemian regions, particularly in suburban municipalities in close proximity to Prague characterized by a high quality of life. Its track in Moravia remains relatively modest, concentrated primarily in southern regions and in specific municipalities featuring popular local incumbents/popular municipal councillors and mayors. The Pirate Party functions largely as dominantly (but not exclusively) urban actor, concentrating its core support in the major metropolitan areas of Prague and Brno. Interestingly, the unusually higher support for the Pirates in peripheral and mountainous border regions can be attributed to institutional voter mobility—utilizing absentee voter certificates while staying at recreational properties over the election weekend. This same phenomenon is also visible for STAN and SPOLU.

Support for the radical-right SPD broadly mirrored the spatial pattern of ANO, albeit with some regional distinctions. SPD performed stronger in the Olomouc Region and South Moravia yet remained weaker in inner peripheries where ANO held dominance (alongside the unsuccessful Enough! coalition, an umbrella list led by the Communist Party featuring Social Democratic candidates). Finally, the newly parliamentary AUTO exhibited a more spatially dispersed pattern of support. However, a closer inspection would have revealed concentrated support in the rural-suburban fringe zones with lower quality of public transportation around medium-sized municipalities in Central Bohemia, and particularly in the Mladá Boleslav district which is the industrial hub of the national automotive manufacturer (Škoda Auto). This spatial footprint suggests that the party successfully mobilized voters driven by opposition to the environmental regulations targeting personal automobile mobility.

Figure 2:
Spatial distribution of vote share in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections



Source: The authors.

The electoral outcomes demonstrate a progressive deepening of spatial polarization across the Czech political landscape and reveal a clear pattern of territorial sorting among established political blocs. Mainstream actors, specifically the governing SPOLU coalition and the populist ANO movement,

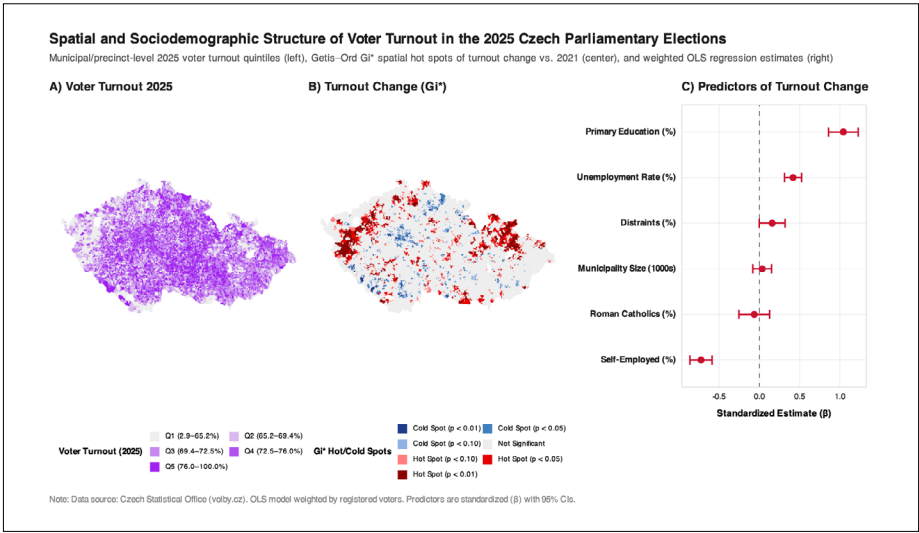
have entrenched their presence within their traditional electoral strongholds while experiencing further erosion in regions where their baseline support was already depressed. This feedback loop amplifies spatial polarization over successive election cycles. This is a trajectory consistently observable since the 2017 parliamentary elections (Lysek et al., 2021; Lysek & Macků, 2022) and possibly reinforced by presidential contests. This territorial divide is manifested along three interlocking dimensions: the classic urban-rural cleavage, the core-periphery axis, and a widening structural divergence between lagging, post-industrial regions (most notably Northern Bohemia and the Moravian-Silesian Region) and economically resilient territories characterized by high indicators of quality of life and social capital (e.g., South Bohemian Region, Vysočina Region, Hradec Králové Region, and Pardubice Region). The pattern aligns with broader European dynamics regarding the ‘geography of discontent’ where regional economic stagnation and peripheralization foster distinct party alignments.

In contrast, parties such as STAN maintain a geographically localized footprint dependent on municipal incumbency and sub-regional networks rather than broader socio-spatial divides (which exhibits the largest difference between marginal R2 accounting only for sociodemographic fixed effects, and conditional R2 accounting also for regional variance). Finally, anti-establishment and the radical-right SPD and newly emerged protest actor the Motorists defy these traditional socio-spatial logic patterns. Their electoral support exhibits a uniform, rather spatially diffuse distribution across the national territory. Crucially, standardized sociodemographic models yield especially low explanatory power (R2) for Motorists. This socio-spatial decoupling suggests that protest voting is not strictly bound to localized structural difficulties (e.g., unemployment or low education), but is instead driven nationwide by valence dissatisfaction, cultural grievances, and ideological opposition to European Green Deal policies. We also cannot rule out the ‘novel appeal’ effect for the segment of volatile voters that switch across elections for new parties that usually have short duration due to its dependency on a leader, poor organisational structure (Deegan-Krause & Haughton, 2018), and low entrenchment within the socioeconomic cleavages.

A defining phenomenon of the 2025 contest was the exceptionally high voter turnout, which reached 68.95%, the highest level recorded in a Czech parliamentary election since 1998. While baseline turnout remains traditionally elevated in larger urban centres and socioeconomically rich regions (Figure 3: A), the primary driver of electoral competition dynamics was the change in turnout relative to the previous 2021 election (B and C of Figure 3). Notably, turnout increase was disproportionately concentrated in socioeconomically vulnerable municipalities characterized by higher shares of primary-educated voters and elevated unemployment rates. Crucially, the standardized predictive model for turnout growth closely mirrors the model estimating support for the populist ANO movement. This empirical convergence demonstrates that voter mobilization was overwhelmingly asymmetrical: ANO successfully activated non-voters in

peripheral and socioeconomically disadvantaged regions, whereas the ruling governing coalition exhibited a constrained mobilization capacity in larger urban cities. Despite the overall increase in turnout, those areas exhibit relative decline in electoral mobilisation (blue colour), while in socioeconomically disadvantaged regions the analysis (Figure 3) indicates statistically significant spatial clusters of increases (red colour).

Figure 3:
Spatial and sociodemographic structure of voter turnout in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections



Source: The authors.

A second key dynamic of the election involved pre-election coalition strategies, specifically informal or ‘covert’ electoral alliances of SPD and Enough! that were virtually approved by the Constitutional Court ruling before the elections (Česká televize, 2025). While not a pivotal factor, the pre-election coalition strategies contributed to a reduction in wasted votes (ballots cast for parties failing to cross the 5% electoral threshold), which plummeted from a historical high of 19.90% in 2021 to 7.26% in 2025 (primarily consisting of Enough! at 4.30% and Oath at 1.07%). Yet the primary driver behind this vote consolidation was ANO’s systematic cannibalization of the protest and left-wing electorate. In 2025, ANO successfully absorbed the fragmented voters who had been disenfranchised in 2021, ultimately hollowing out the traditional left (most notably SOCDEM and the Communist Party, under new label Enough!), and subsumed support from smaller anti-establishment actors. This sharp drop in wasted votes was a complementary factor enabling Andrej Babiš to construct a comfortable governing majority.

Whereas the 2021 election wasted protest vote penalizing anti-establishment parties facilitated the formation of a centre-right government led by SPOLU. This suggests that the bloc of former governing parties must mobilize additional voters outside their core base, because the share of wasted votes will most likely be smaller due to the Constitutional Court's judicial approval of 'covert coalitions'.

Finally, the election featured notable intra-party and descriptive representation dynamics. Preferential voting led to significant candidate list reshuffling, most dramatically within the Pirate Party. Ironically, this happened for the second time, as the party had gained only four seats on the PirSTAN joint list in 2021, meaning it was not needed for government formation (Kudrnáč & Petrúšek, 2022). This time Pirate voters systematically jumped female and younger candidates (including two Green female candidates running on the Pirate list) over original list rankings (beyond the lead candidate in Prague), yielding a parliamentary delegation with a distinctly young female-dominated composition. More broadly, the overall proportion of female MPs (67 out of 200) in the Chamber of Deputies increased across the political spectrum, marking a meaningful reduction in gender disparity and advancing descriptive gender representation within the Czech legislature.

The special issue is made of eight articles focusing on three areas: the content of electoral campaigns and party narrative before the election, party strategies, and electoral results. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the changes in the US foreign security policy after the re-election of Donald Trump as the main drivers of the recent dynamic in geopolitical environment, have affected the political discourses of Czech political parties. As a consequence, the long-term dominance of economic issues has been accompanied by an increase in salience of foreign policy and security issues. In his article, Vít Hloušek (2026) analyses the way how foreign and European policy was politicized in the narratives of relevant political parties and coalitions. Using a qualitative narrative approach, the article examines the alignment of the narratives with the established ideational frames such as liberal internationalism, isolationism, Eurooptimism, and (hard and soft) Euroscepticism. Hloušek points to a clear division between the incumbent and opposition parties: while the government parties (and the Pirate Party) articulated internationalist, Atlanticist and Eurooptimist narratives, the opposition parties offered more nuanced, less pro-Western/NATO and generally Eurosceptic frames.

Irena Skalová's article (Skalová, 2026) is the second study in this issue that is focused on the content of electoral campaigns. Skalová examines how political actors used historical narratives in televised debates during the 2025 Czech parliamentary election campaign. Drawing on theories of memory politics, framing, symbolic politics, and populist communication, she uses qualitative discourse and content analysis of debates broadcast by major Czech television outlets. She identifies four main strategies – historical analogies, warnings against repeating past mistakes, the heroization of democratic milestones, and

reinterpretations of historical parallels – and argues that these references served primarily as tools of emotional and moral mobilization. By linking contemporary issues such as migration, the EU, and democracy to the communist past, the events of 1968, and 1989, political actors transformed programmatic disagreements into broader moral conflicts, thereby reinforcing political polarization.

In their article, Alberto Lioy and Petra Vodová (2026) turn attention to the previously under-researched digital dimension of Czech political parties, mapping the online infrastructures of the nine main parties contesting the 2025 general election. Building on the literature on party digitalization, Lioy and Vodová formulate hypotheses linking digital infrastructure to party type and age, degree of internal centralization, and government-opposition status. Their findings offer only partial confirmation of these expectations: party age proves a poor predictor of digital proficiency, since some long-established formations mounted highly professionalized campaigns while several newer parties lagged behind, and traditional parties did not systematically outperform newer ones in local digital outreach, with the Pirates, STAN, and TOP 09 achieving the widest regional diffusion. Internal party organization, by contrast, is more clearly reflected online: leader-centric parties such as ANO, SPD, and the Motorists concentrate communication around dominant figures, whereas the Pirates, STAN, and KDU-ČSL display more open, distributed forms of platform politics. On this basis, the article offers a novel empirical and conceptual contribution to the study of online campaigning in a Central European context.

Pre-electoral alliances have become an increasingly important feature of Czech party competition, particularly in the context of the recent party system fragmentation and the constraints created by the electoral threshold. In their article, Tomáš Jarmara and Ladislav Mrklas (2026) analyse open and hidden forms of pre-electoral cooperation in the 2025 Czech parliamentary elections, focusing on their electoral effects, strategic motivations, and implications for parliamentary representation. Using qualitative analysis of alliance agreements and candidate lists combined with quantitative analysis of electoral results and polling data, the authors conceptualize hidden alliances as a form of institutional adaptation to electoral rules.

The analysis contrasts the openly institutionalized SPOLU alliance with hidden forms of cooperation involving SPD, the Pirates, STAN, and Motorists for Themselves. The authors further demonstrate that preferential voting can significantly shape the distribution of seats within alliances. Overall, they argue that pre-electoral alliances should primarily be understood as instrumental strategies of adaptation to electoral institutions and party system fragmentation. The study contributes significantly to the understanding of the recent developments of the Czech party system and to the research on electoral coalitions in general.

Jakub Charvát (2026) examines whether the 2025 general election extends the ongoing transformation of the Czech party system or signals a return to

stability. Using indicators of party system continuity, the effective number of parties, volatility, and electoral polarization, alongside an assessment of party system format, he finds strong continuity: all parliamentary parties retained seats, with the Motorists the sole newcomer, fragmentation declined, and volatility rose only slightly, driven mainly by shifts among established parties. Polarization between the populist and anti-populist blocs stayed near its post-2013 level of roughly 50–55%, as ANO consolidated dominance within the populist camp at the expense of SPD and the Enough! alliance, while the party system format – extreme multi-partyism with one dominant party – remained unchanged. Yet Charvát argues the election was not a simple maintaining contest either, since it produced a government alternation to a populist-led coalition of ANO, SPD, and the Motorists – the first Czech government including a populist right-wing junior partner. He situates this within the debate on illiberal backlash in Central Europe, concluding that while the result carries some risk for Czech democracy, an illiberal turn is not inevitable if political and civil-society actors can shift competition from affective polarization toward substantive policy debate.

Lukáš Linek and Michael Škvrňák (2026) investigate the class voting in the 2025 election in the context of long-term trends in the electoral behaviour in the Czech Republic. Drawing on post-election survey data from ten national elections held between 1992 and 2025, the authors examine how the relationship between social class and party choice has evolved as the Czech party system underwent successive waves of fragmentation and the emergence of new (often populist or anti-establishment) parties. Linek and Škvrňák show that class voting peaked around 2006–2010, declined to a low point in 2017, and then recovered strongly in 2021 and 2025. The article thus demonstrates that the apparent decline of class voting in the 2010s reflected a temporary increase in party-system volatility linked to partly non-economic mobilization rather than a structural disappearance of class as a basis of electoral competition.

Jakub Čapek and Adam Slavíček (2026) examine how mayoral status translated into electoral success in the 2025 Czech general election, using an original dataset of candidates from parliamentary parties. They confirm a statistically significant ‘mayoral bonus’ in the probability of being elected, though this advantage proves more limited than commonly assumed: it falls well short of the incumbency advantage of MPs. The analysis reveals pronounced variation across parties and regions. STAN fielded by far the largest number of mayoral candidates, yet its mayors were paradoxically the party's least successful professional group, a pattern the authors attribute to internal cannibalization of preferential votes among too many prominent local candidates. By contrast, ANO fielded fewer mayors but deployed them far more effectively. The authors conclude that municipal experience remains a valuable recruitment channel in Czech politics, but its electoral payoff is finite, saturable, and heavily conditioned by party context and regional dynamics rather than an unconditional personal asset.

Petr Bláha (2026) examines the sharp increase in women's parliamentary representation following the 2025 Czech elections, asking how this occurred in the absence of gender quotas or electoral reform. Drawing on the supply-and-demand model of candidate selection and theories of personalized voting in open-list systems, he combines candidate-level data from the 2021 and 2025 elections with decomposition analysis, regression discontinuity, and difference-in-differences designs. The study finds that the increase in women's representation resulted from both changes in party candidate supply and a stronger effect of preferential voting, with each accounting for roughly half of the overall increase. Importantly, however, the effect of preferential voting varied substantially across parties and contexts, suggesting that open-list voting can enhance women's representation when favourable candidate supply is combined with effective voter mobilization.

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